

Choosing How to Remember the Past – Brian Hartley
September 14, 2014

Exodus 14:19-31, Psalm 114, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

At about 7:20 p.m. on the evening of November 14, 1940, the very Reverend Dick Howard, Provost of Coventry Cathedral, heard the unmistakable rumble of some 500 enemy aircraft overhead and ran for cover. The German dive bomber, known as the Stuka, had a distinctive sound as the engine would rev just before the release of the bombs. Those who lived through the attacks never forgot that peculiar roar. For the next eleven hours or so, the people of Coventry huddled wherever they could as the Luftwaffe dropped over a hundred tons of incendiary bombs on the Midlands village. The medieval parish church of St. Michael, along with most of the city, burned to the ground—much of it charred beyond recognition.

Two days later, King George VI, father of the current queen, visited the city to pay his respects as the mass burials began. It would take days to free some survivors trapped beneath the wreckage and weeks to recover all of the bodies. The German high command had communicated to the flight crews that this particular bombing was in reprisal for the Allied raid earlier on Munich. In response to the devastation at Coventry and the London blitz, less than five years later, American crews would release some 3900 tons of incendiary bombs and explosive devices over Dresden producing an unprecedented firestorm over the city that would kill some 25,000 civilians. Lothar Metzger, a survivor, would write: “We saw terrible things: cremated adults shrunk to the size of small children, pieces of arms and legs, dead people, whole families burnt to death, burning people ran to and fro, burnt coaches filled with civilian refugees, dead rescuers and soldiers, many were calling and looking for their children and families, and fire everywhere, everywhere fire, and all the time the hot wind of the firestorm threw people back into the burning houses they were trying to escape from.”

Most of those who experienced or took part in these atrocities of war are now gone. We tend to think of such violent acts as being a part of groups like ISIS, who recently broadcast their commitment through the circulation of videos in which two Western journalists were brutally beheaded. And yet, as we head into the waning days of this summer of 2014, throughout Europe the hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the first war is being remembered. The brutality of life in the trenches and the incessant booming of industrial weaponry seared into the participants such violent images that men would oftentimes come back from the front “shell-shocked” and unable to participate in the everyday, ordinary, and mundane of what we think of as civilized life.

At a recent service to commemorate these losses held at St. Paul’s Cathedral, the Bishop of London, the Right Reverend Richard Chartres, said, “We cannot change the past, but we are responsible for how we remember it. And how we remember it, opens up the future.” Today’s lesson from the first testament bears out this truth. As we continue this march through the book of Exodus, we come this morning to one of the key texts of identity for the people of God. As the scholar, Gene Tucker, reminds us: “It is an extremely important story in Old Testament tradition, but it is not—as some commentators have thought—the central point of the Exodus itself,” (*Preaching the New Common Lectionary*, 130). Yet, this deliverance narrative became,

like the story of the Coventry bombing and the London blitz, a center piece of mythic proportions for how Israel understood itself as a people whose identity was forged through trial.

Critics are quick to point out the multiplicity of sources at work here, creating a host of questions about how the rescue itself was effected. For instance, did the sea divide to allow all of Israel to cross, or did a strong east wind blow back the waters so that the Egyptian chariots became clogged in the mud? The narrative itself is filled with differences in style, repetition, duplicates, and a host of questions as a later editor probably attempted to splice together several sources—each of which carried a particular theological agenda. But, however we read these texts their present import stresses the power and might of Israel’s God, the one Ruth Huston reminded us two weeks ago is not only active in the past, but in the present and future, as well.

As the good bishop suggests, I would like to posit that the story, as told, was not so much about what happened in the past, but, as Pastor Judy suggested last week, through its anamnetic rhetorical power it is meant to invite readers to rehearse the liturgy in such a way as to invite themselves into the story. That is why the song that comes later in chapter 15 is oftentimes thought to be one of the oldest pieces of Jewish worship—a song that tells the story of God’s victory over the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds. For just a few moments, I would like for you to consider this possibility. How might this story have been heard by later generations of Jews? As colonies of a defeated Israel gathered in the ancient city of Babylon and wept over the loss of the temple, how might they have read themselves into the story? Or, as Antiochus Epiphanes IV desecrated the remains of the temple in Jerusalem a few hundred years later, what new meanings might this narrative have yielded? And, perhaps most importantly, during the first century as Palestinian Jews experienced the irony of the *Pax Romana*, the so-called “peace of Rome,” how might they have rediscovered meaning? As Rome put to death scores of Jews on crosses outside the city, might the storyline of the defeat of the Egyptians have stirred them to hope? Might they, in their anger, have rehearsed their string of insults hurled upon them by a pagan empire?

Having lived through the recent bombings in Gaza and the Palestinian response, we should have some understanding of where this line of thinking might take us. The pain of hurt and degradation can drag on generation after generation until mutual hatred becomes the order of the day and objectification of the other becomes normative. And we don’t have to look to the Middle East for such an example. Our own recent history of words like “Jap” and “Hun” provide terrible reminders, let alone internal use of the “N-word” used to categorize those of a different skin color and socio-economic status. If we probe beneath the recent violence across the river in Ferguson, we uncover a narrative tapestry of hatred and abuse that stretches back hundreds of years and which is tied to our history as a slave-holding country. Whether we acknowledge it or not, this is an important part of our collective past and national DNA and, try as we might, we cannot bury or ignore it.

Into such a vortex, the Jesus of Matthew’s gospel offers a radically different alternative. In the rabbinic tradition, the generous standard of forgiveness was three times. But Simon Peter stretches it out here to the perfect number of seven. Such generosity of spirit would have been seen as clearly going “over the top.” But Jesus, following the pattern to which we have grown accustomed here in Matthew, proclaims the number seventy-seven—signaling an unlimited expanse to forgiveness. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, commenting on this passage, says: “When you

count, once, twice, three times, the whole matter gets increasingly threatening—and your relationship with that person gets increasingly agonizing—but do you not notice that as long as you are still counting, for that long you are still reckoning that earlier sin against the person, for that long you still have not really forgiven that person, not even for the first time! Forgiving has neither beginning nor end; it takes place daily, unceasingly, for ultimately it comes from God.” And note here that this morning’s text comes on the heels of last week’s gospel passage, which provides the pattern to which most congregations still appeal—thus, the so-called “Matthew 18 principle.” Clearly, forgiveness is meant to be at the heart of the Christian’s understanding and is ultimately rooted in the model of the crucified Christ who calls us to live a life of cruciformity.

But what does this forgiveness consist of? Fred Craddock claims that it is, literally, “that which creates and sustains the Christian community.” “Forgiveness,” he says, “is not carelessness or indifference to wrong...permissiveness or the absence of any sense of ethical standards. On the contrary, there can be no forgiveness without standards and values being violated, without persons and relationships being hurt, without a loss so deeply felt that efforts at restoration are pursued. From a distance, forgiveness may look like condoning or permissiveness, but in reality forgiveness takes the violators, the violated, and the violation most seriously. To be forgiven is to be taken seriously. Forgiveness does not abrogate but fulfills righteousness,” (*Preaching the New Common Lectionary*, 189-190).

Yet, it is so much easier to hang on to the hurt and to allow anger to grind away at our hearts and souls. Henri Nouwen says that, “...when we have been deeply hurt by another person, it is nearly impossible not to have hostile thoughts, feelings of anger or hatred, and even a desire to take revenge. All of this often happens spontaneously, without much inner control. We simply find ourselves brooding about what we are going to say or do to pay back the person who has hurt us. To choose blessings instead of curses in such a situation asks for an enormous leap of faith. It calls for a willingness to go beyond all our urges to get even and to choose a life-giving response. Sometimes this seems impossible,” he points out, but, “still, whenever we move beyond our wounded selves and claim our God-given selves, we give life not just to ourselves but also the ones who have offended us,” (*Bread for the Journey*).

In the wake of the tragic bombing and high civilian casualties, this was exactly the choice that the people of Coventry chose to take. The story is a moving one, beginning with the actions taken by Jock Forbes, the cathedral stone mason, who, within days of the bombing happened to be walking down the blackened nave of the shell of the medieval structure and noticed that two of the large timbers that had fallen to the ground had done so in the shape of a cross. When the community dragged an altar into the ruins, Mr. Forbes, with the help of others, hauled the timbers up on to the altar. A local priest followed suit, fashioning three of the medieval nails into a similar cruciform shape. Above them, the congregation scrawled in blackened ash the phrase, “Father, forgive.” From these early insights of the community came the conviction that the new cathedral would be all about the ministry of reconciliation and that they, despite their many losses, would choose the way of forgiveness.

The new cathedral did not rise from the ashes of the old but, instead, took shape alongside its medieval ancestor. When one first approaches the grounds the clash between the modernist architecture alongside the old Gothic shell can be quite jarring. Consecrated in 1962, Benjamin

Britten composed his famous “War Requiem” for the occasion and the Queen came to town to lay the cornerstone of what is, in effect, two structures joined together by the same local sandstone, yet forming one building. There is nothing quite like it in all of England and it remains one of my favorite places to take students when we visit the Emerald Isle.

But the story doesn’t end with the construction of the new cathedral. Out of the ashes also arose the Centre for Reconciliation in 1940 which began the sharing of personnel and rebuilding after the war. Citizens from Coventry made their way to Germany to assist in the rebuilding of places such as the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin, while representatives from the Eastern bloc participated in restoring French and English churches. Rather than seek revenge for devastation, under the aegis of the “community of the nails,” St. Michael’s and the larger Coventry community sought to offer forgiveness.

I belabor this story because it offers a concrete example of the message of today’s lessons. Not only does it “flesh out” the call to forgiveness, in lieu of retribution, but it demonstrates a positive interpretation of the Bishop of London’s call to choose how we remember the past. And perhaps during this week especially, as we have replayed the horrors of 9/11, we need reminding that the images of the twin towers and all that followed demand from us a response. One way of responding might be to follow in the wake of much of the military conflict that has marked the last hundred years. And one certainly could marshal arguments to engage in what some call “just war.” But, the people of Israel also demonstrate through today’s scripture lesson that there is more than one way to tell a story and more than one way to interpret the past.

And, so, with the image of Coventry Cathedral in mind, I would like to invite you to take up pen and paper and construct a new narrative alongside perhaps the one which you have scripted and which you have, perhaps, replayed countless times in your mind. All of us bear the wounds of pain, tragedy, and conflict—some more than others. We cannot alter what has happened in the past. But we are responsible for how we will remember it. Forgiveness is never easy and does not come cheap. But, it offers to each of us a chance to find hope and healing. As Jonathan Corey reminds us in a recent interview: “By freely forgiving our enemies and those who have wounded us, we are free to live without the destructive bitterness that unforgiveness creates. In Greek, forgiveness actually means “to send away” and is the mechanism by which we turn people and situations over to God—recognizing that it is his job, and only his job, to deal with them appropriately.” (<http://jonathanmerritt.religionnews.com/2014/09/11/christians-domestic-jesus-benjamin-corey/#sthash.LmuMPMqM.dpuf>)

Inside today’s worship folder you will find a small index card. I would like to invite you to use it during our time of gathering this morning at the Lord’s Table. I do not know what wounds you bear—God alone knows. But I would invite you to use this card as a means of offering forgiveness to someone or something. Perhaps it is an event that you have found it difficult to let go of, or perhaps it is a person who has deeply hurt you. If you wish to write something on the card—a sentence, an item, a name, even a symbol known only to you—I would invite you to do so. As you approach the celebrant today, I would ask those of you who wish to bring your card forward and to place it on the table—to make an offering of your card to God as a sign and symbol of choosing the way of forgiveness. At the end of our communion liturgy together—just before we join in the Prayer after Communion—I will voice a prayer over these cards that God

might take them and bless our desire to both find and to offer forgiveness. By so doing, we will join with the community in Coventry and those Christians around the world and throughout time who have chosen the way of reconciliation over violence. As the late poet, Maya Angelou, reminds us: "Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, and penetrates walls, to arrive at its destination full of hope." For, though, "we cannot change the past, we are responsible for how we remember it. And how we remember it, opens up the future." Amen.